

Note 3: On to the Louis Vuitton Cup Final

By Gary Jobson, President
National Sailing Hall of Fame

August 13, 2013

The biggest question in every sport is who is going to win the contest? On paper, Emirates Team New Zealand looks like an easy victor against Italy's Luna Rossa in the Louis Vuitton Cup challenger trials. In July, New Zealand defeated Luna Rossa in every head-to-head race by over one mile. Last week, however, the Italian crew improved each day against Artemis Racing in the semi-final match. Did the competition help Luna Rossa enough to possibly defeat the powerful Kiwis?

Before addressing Italy's chances, there are some important points to note about the upcoming regatta. The first two races will be on Saturday, August 17. The winner is the first boat to win seven races. It could be a long series. The first race each day is scheduled for 1:10 local time. The race should last about 30 minutes. After a 30 minute break, the boats will start again for Race Two at 2:10. Over the past month we have seen the wind here in San Francisco build later in the afternoon. There is a 21 knot wind strength limit for this round. The wind limit is adjusted for the current. If there is a flood tide of 1.5 knots, the wind limit increases to 22.5 knots. If the tide is ebbing at 1.5 knots (flowing out of the bay), the race committee will reduce the wind limit to 19.5 knots. For the first week the tide will be ebbing. This could be helpful to Luna Rossa because the races will be sailed in somewhat lighter wind. On the other hand, the downwind legs will be longer, which will help New Zealand; they seem to excel when sailing to leeward. Adding to the equation is the fact that each team is allowed to postpone the second race of the day. This allows for a breakdown or some other problem. Like any sport "time outs" are generally held until the end of the game. We might learn that one boat is faster in lighter winds, and may use their time out to avoid racing when the wind is heavy in the afternoon.

In the semi-final races last week, Luna Rossa seemed to be a little faster relative to Artemis Racing when the wind was lighter. New Zealand, on the other hand, seems to be very fast in

strong winds. If it was up to them, New Zealand would rather see a higher wind limit. In the America's Cup the wind limit goes up to 23 knots. But, we have a lot of sailing ahead of us before the Cup. This gets me back to the big question. Can Italy win?

Italy and New Zealand met in the America's Cup match before in 2000. That year, Russell Coutts was the skipper for NZL. In the last race of the best of nine series, he passed the helm over to his young protégé, Dean Barker. New Zealand defeated the Italians in five straight races. Barker has been at the helm of every NZL team since then. Let there be no doubt the New Zealand crew is really strong. They have far more time on the water than any other team. Oracle Team USA lost four months last year when their boat capsized and broke up. The good news for the American team is they have two boats sailing now and are on the water training every day. To my eye, NZL is ahead of Oracle now, but in one month the situation could be different, thanks to all of Oracle's in-house racing.

Italy does have several strengths. First they showed well against Artemis Racing. As Luna Rossa's skipper Max Sirena pointed out after the racing, "All our time racing was helpful." Skipper Chris Draper is becoming more comfortable at the wheel. He and tactician Francesco Bruni seem to know how to sail the boat efficiently at all times. Luna Rossa now stays on its foils through jibes. They were unable to do that in July against New Zealand. The Italians also have a second wing that was damaged in practice before the semi-finals. This second generation wing will improve their speed in the next round. There always seems to be less pressure on the underdog in any sport. Luna Rossa is the underdog. To win, Chris Draper needs to win the starts. Against Artemis Racing Draper had one win on the starting line, a draw and two losses. Soon after the first leg of all four races, Luna Rossa took control and stretched out their lead to win by an average of two minutes. At 30 knots this is about a one mile lead.

Luna Rossa is managed by Patrizio Bertelli, head of the Prada fashion house. Bertelli has been in the America's Cup game now for 15 years. He will be a steady hand behind the scenes helping them make good decisions. Luna Rossa also has a strong coach in Steve Erickson, who is an American Olympic Gold medalist, and six-time veteran of the America's Cup. This is his fourth campaign with the Italians. Several members of the Luna Rossa crew are also Olympic champions. These include Spain's Xabier Fernandez, who has a Gold and Silver medal in the 49er class, and helmsman Chris Draper, who has a Bronze in the 49er class. The team also has a strong design team that includes 13 engineers working hard to find improvements.

Emirates Team New Zealand had their boat in the shed for the past ten days. It is likely that their boat will be faster too. The Kiwis have to be careful to focus on the current match and not look too far ahead to the America's Cup. Sailing is a sport where strange things can happen. A

breakdown, an injury to a crew, or a series of mistakes can get a team out of balance. This is certainly true of an NFL team. The competition will certainly be a benefit to the Kiwis who do not have their first generation boat in the water. I am told it is about 90-percent ready to go if they have an emergency.

The Louis Vuitton Cup final and the America's Cup will feature short, 30 minute races. The crews will be tested every second. Calling good tactics will be crucial to success. We are learning that the swift currents of San Francisco Bay are a big factor even in the speedy AC72s. In every race, the leading boat seems to stretch out. There are not many passing lanes. You can bet that the tacticians and coaches of all teams have been studying the currents, wind patterns and strategic possibilities very carefully. Finding a way to pass another boat after an initial lead is established will be a huge task.

Luna Rossa has its work cut out. Winning 7 of 13 races against Emirates Team New Zealand will be hard. Everyone loves an underdog, so Italy will have plenty of support. After this match, the playoffs will be over and the big show will be on the world stage — the 34th America's Cup.